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ABSTRACT

Aurora, a village of 147 residents in north central Kansas, was the focus of a 1978 investigation of the community development potential for Kansas rural villages. Students and staff from the University of Kansas School of Social Welfare worked with community residents to identify three programs the village wanted (a recreation program, a community library, and a grocery store project). During the summer, the recreation committee began its operations with youth activities, a community dance, fund raising and plans for a youth center. The library committee established a library of 900 volumes loaned by the Central Kansas Library System. The grocery store committee developed a plan in which a local resident could own and manage a grocery store and local residents could buy shares in the store. When staff involvement was high, the level of citizen participation was also high, but it was not sustained. The youth programs continued aided by agricultural extension staff; the library struggled during the year without adequate volunteers; and the grocery store and youth center never materialized. However, certain positive factors did emerge from the Aurora experience. It did demonstrate what can be initiated in a community development process. In addition, Aurora's statewide conference on rural villages presented community development to 150 participants from 37 Kansas communities. (DS)

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KANSAS RURAL VILLAGES PROJECT

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A Community Development Project

"COMMUNITIES LEFT BEHIND"

"Small is beautiful" and "convivial austerity" are concepts being offered as alternatives to energy and other crisis which currently plague us. Rural villages in Kansas may present a noteworthy approach to contemporary living, in contrast to more paralyzed and congested urban areas. This report is about one brief encounter with these small, beautiful, and convivial villages.

At least three questions arose in relation to this Rural Villages Project which students at the University of Kansas School of Social Welfare addressed during the summer of 1978:

- Are rural villages reflectors of the past and present in terms of expression of community and broader society values, as well as indicators of the future?

- What do these rural villages teach us in terms of contemporary values and behaviors related to such areas as standardization, centralization, bureaucratization, and citizen impotence?

- As microcosms, can rural villages shed any light on how to deal with community problems?

One of the major findings of the project was...

> There is a constant dying and creating of futures. Kansas rural villages futurity depends both upon its citizens and resources. They have an active, complex existence and are eager for further development. Kansas rural villages offer unique opportunities for persons concerned with improvements in the environment and quality of community life. Citizens of these communities do not hold a fatalistic attitude that their villages are "dying"; rather, numerous persons were found to be engaged in community betterment, plan to remain in their villages, and want assistance to improve their communities. Institutional resources of Kansas need to recognize the quality of these villages and to include them more in the main stream of state-wide activities.

This report provides a description and evaluation of the Rural Villages Project. The students and faculty investigator who participated in this project are appreciative of the funding of the project by the Board of Regents - State of Kansas and its Extension Officer, Dr. Gene Kasper. Funds came from the federal Title IA, Higher Education Act.

Finally, the strengths of this project belong to the residents of these rural villages who participated in it -- and to the four field staff persons: Scott Shelley, field director, and Cynthia Hale, Al Schmidt, and Ann Swegle.

II. Background

Kansas rural villages, composed of 250 citizens or less, have often been viewed as dying both socially and economically. Unable to integrate themselves into today's urbanized and specialized society, a verdict has been offered that they are vanishing. A stereotype has gained widespread acceptance: 1) the population is predominately made up of older people; 2) the young abandon villages and no replacements move in; 3) those left behind lack aptitude for moving ahead; and 4) villages fall short of the essentials for cultural enrichment.

Population trends for the first half of this century have underscored rural villages' image as dying communities. However, since the early 1960's the population trend has slowed; in some cases it has been reversed. In 1960, 34,500 people resided in incorporated Kansas towns of less than 250. By 1970, this statistic had dropped to 32,000; by 1976, the decrease was only to 30,000. Louis Douglas and Scott Shelley (1975), at Kansas State University, initiated an investigation of these villages by analyzing one Kansas village. They found that Dunlap, which a national television documentary ten years earlier had declared would perish, has stablized its population. Shelley then surveyed mayors of Kansas villages and found they were eager for assistance. These investigations became the foundation for the Rural Villages Project in 1978-1979.

II. Goal and Methods

The aim of the project was to investigate the community development potential for Kansas rural villages. The methods that formed the basis for planning were:

A. to hold a state-wide conference involving residents, public and private resources, to consider the community development potential of Kansas rural villages;

B. to conduct a community development program in one village as a demonstration;

C. to further refine a community survey instrument and administer it in one village;

D. to coordinate the project with relevant resources and develop an on-going dialogue concerning these villages.

An assumption of the project was that "big things are done in small bits". Rather than work solely on a state-wide effort, the project also focused on a specific village to demonstrate a community development process. Aurora, a village of 147 residents in northcentral Kansas, was selected; it also became the site for the state-wide conference.

III. Description of Summer, 1978 Program

Five staff people participated in the Project: field director, three research assistants and a part-time principle investigator. The field staff were employed only during the summer of 1978, and they set up an office in the Aurora City Hall.

June: Staff spent three weeks interviewing Aurora residents and the township to familiarize them with the community and to establish a rapport with people. Interviewing was done through home visits, at the city hall, or on the street. An Aurora town meeting was called, and sixty residents attended. It resulted in the identification of three programs which citizens wanted: 1) recreation program, 2) community library, and 3) grocery store. These programs were selected among many mentioned because it was believed important to work on tasks which would have high visibility, have a chance of success, and could be done within the summer period when staff was available. Committees were formed, and the Mayor granted city sanction. Also, contacts were made with local, regional, and state resources.

July: Community residents and staff worked in the context of the committee

structure and continued to make contact with various agencies. Also, staff and Aurora residents began planning for a state-wide conference to be entitled "Small Rural Villages Exploring Community Development Potential and Practice." Staff revised and administered a community development survey questionnaire which Douglas and Shelley had previously used.

The recreation committee began its operation in early July with youth activities, community dance, fund raising, and formulating plans for a youth center. The library committee established a library of 900 volumes in the city hall; many books were provided on a rotating basis by the Central Kansas Library System. The grocery store committee developed a plan by which a local resident would own and manage the grocery store, with local residents buying shares in the store. A feasibility study was completed and contacts were made with a bank and the Small Business Administration.

August: Activities from the previous month were continued, and the Rural Villages Conference was held. Staff visited other villages. Cafes were seen as important socializing centers for local residents. Almost all the villages had experienced the closing of the local school building through district consolidations. Many parents expressed regret that school closings had diminished social interaction amongst school families. Some villages had been helped by the government on housing improvements. Inadequate transportation and larger farm operations that crowded out the small farmer were offered as reasons for the decline of villages.

The Conference was attended by over 150 participants. Among those formally registered were residents from 37 Kansas communities, representing 25 counties. Professionals from state, regional, and local agencies attended. An outcome of the conference was the establishment of a state-wide organization, Rural Kansas, Inc., which has become affiliated with Rural

America, Inc. Kansas State University assumed staff responsibility for the continuation of this effort. Presentations by a few participants can be highlighted.

The keynote speaker was Dale Lyons, President of the Kansas Farmers Union. "Big things don't fit into small places," Lyons said of the special nature of small-town problems and the limitations of big-city or industrial techniques in dealing with them. He asserted that the increasing scale of agriculture has thinned the number of farmers while stripping the land of people who once made rural villages thrive. The search for economic alternatives often ends unsatisfactorily. The unquestioned solution is to bring in industry to revive the local economy, and all too often an outside industry brings little to the community. According to Lyons, rural villages should seek industries that keeps money in them rather than taking it out. Lyons' comments were echoed throughout the conference -- whatever a small town does to help itself must be what those residents want and not the desire of an outside corporation or governmental agency.

Workshop remarks on small systems technologies were made by Wes Jackson, of the Land Institute in Salina, and William Ward, representing Windindustries of Topeka. They stressed the impending energy shortages that will bring about dramatic changes in the lifetimes of most Kansans. Jackson discussed changes affecting agricultural production and the need for more balance as a way of life. Rural villages will experience a significant impact as remote consumers of goods and services at the end of the supply line; these villages are going to be vulnerable. As a remedy to this situation, they need to consider a regional semi-self-sufficiency. Jackson suggested putting as much land back to grass as possible to avoid pollution and erosion. He stressed the need to plant trees to develop fuel energy through wood power that is

replenishable. Kansans should consider the construction of future buildings out of tamped earth or adobe brick. Jackson said we need to move into solar collectors, to make use of manure within buildings as an energy source, and to make our kitchens less energy draining.

Ward continued Jackson's theme by discussing the sound job Kansas has done on tax credits and property tax abatements for alternative energy, including wind. He predicted that as manufacturing plans gear up to build more winindustries, the projections of the cost of wind energy becomes comparatively more feasible as other energy costs rise. Unfortunately, the federal government has encouraged investments in large capital intensive wind generators rather than in moderate wind technologies which are more practical for rural villages. Both Jackson and Ward were oracles as their remarks were made prior to the omnipresent current energy crisis. Other conference participants supported the conclusion that it is unfortunate the governmental sources are not walking down more of these soft-energy paths. The Rural Villages Project was on mark in involving these people to discuss environmental and energy issues.

Other panel discussions were held related to health care delivery in rural villages, building political power, small businesses and small farmers, and innovations in community education.

IV. Evaluation and Analysis of Conference and Aurora Project

A. State-wide Conference and Human Ecology: One rural citizen stated, "This is the first state-wide conference held in one of our villages rather than us having to travel to a larger community or institution." The rural residents assumed a major role in the conference and gave positive feedback through an evaluation form.

From the conference emerged a finding that rural villages contain the

potential for people working together on energy and other environmental issues confronting our society. The current gasoline crisis, a manifestation of a broader energy problem, capital intensive technologies which dominate our society, centralization of decision-making, multi-complex bureaucracies -- these factors indicate we live in a society dominated by large-scale commodities. Rural villages have been impacted by mechanized agriculture and increased farming operations, centralized school districts resulting in abandoned school buildings, and regional and state-wide comprehensive delivery systems of services directed at a distance from villages. Abandoned commerical buildings in villages indicate greater marketing in more populated cities. At the same time, rural villages have advantages, and perhaps it has been fortunate they have been "left-behind". Autonomy, self-sufficiency, and decentralization characterize villages more than cities. Aurora is not a community dominated by professionals who impute needs and prescribe remedies. It is still a community of citizens, not clients; it has not yet become a ward of the planners.

Ivan Illich suggests that a highly centralized, industrialized, and standardized mode of producing goods and services has led to specialization of functions, institutionalization of values, concentration of power, and turned people into accessories of bureaucracites. He argues for more convivial tools which enlarge the range of each person and community's competency, control and initiative. Rural villages would seem to be likely places for people to pursue these independent, self-sufficient, and value-use goals; that is, they can and do create more of their own goods and services which they value. For example, the cafe owner in Aurora maintains a zoo behind his store even though the public health officials had him remove it further from his business; the July 4th celebration was planned and conducted

mutually and informally by adults and children rather than by a paid recreation specialist or the local service club; cooperative vegetable gardens exist in part because there isn't an impersonal supermarket. These seemingly negative factors might in the long-run be the positive models for more dependent larger communities to emulate. In the past, this analysis could have been criticized as a desire to regress and return to an ideal which probably never existed; but today such "convival austerity" could become an imperative as hard technologies, professional domination, and imported products have possibly begun to exceed their limits. Obviously, there needs to ba a balance between the use of appropriate technology and the protection of the liberties of people. Rural villages hold the potential for balancing these scales.

Project staff visited a number of other rural villages than Aurora and found the local cafe invariably to be a "community center" -- possibly a recreation center in the morning for the children during the summer, as a gathering center for adults during their coffee breaks and lunches, and an evening meeting ground for various age levels and families. Although there were problems observed in such situations, an integration of age-levels and sectors of the village and township occurred. Without doctors who realistically aren't going to choose to locate in these rural villages, perhaps people can be moved to self-monitor and maintain their own health care more. Less traffic and transportation means less pollution, energy consumption, and more development of local resources. Rural villages of Kansas provide a significant resource for people to explore in relation to contemporary life-style choices that people are probably going to have to make. Economically, rural villages need to develop businesses which keep money and jobs in the community; community economic development needs greater

exploration. At the minimum, rural villages offer challenges to the ideas of "small is beautiful", "soft technologies", and finding significance as an individual in a mass society.

Professionals must be cautious about imputing needs to others and then prescribing remedies. The project did not provide a blue-print for what these rural villages can or should be. Such a development should emerge out of a community development process led by the citizens of these rural villages. Universities and other institutions must be sensitive in involving people and developing partnership relationships with them rather than imposing expert, elitist solutions. The project planfully moved from the felt needs of the people, involved citizens throughout the project, and did not aggressively pursue the results through some grandiose plans for these villages.

B. Aurora Community Development Program: The project in Aurora was a partial success. It reached the anticipated target group of village citizens and resource people. The level of participation during the intensive involvement of staff in the summer of 1978 was considerable, but the continued level of citizen maintenance was less than anticipated. The program followed in Aurora a specific model of community development:

1. Enter Community
   a. General Assessment
   b. Deployment of staff
   c. Establishment of project's presence in community

2. Begin to know people and issues
   a. Information gathering
   b. Individual casework (where appropriate requests are made)
   c. Enhancement of existing local cooperative efforts

3. Arouse interest
   a. Begin working with groups in community
   b. Enhance development of indigenous issues and leaders
   c. Clarification of specific problems

4. Development of organizational base
   a. Recruitment of broad spectrum of local citizens
   b. Coordination of task work with various resources

5. Development of institutional base
   a. Broaden sense of involvement
   b. Group work directed at consolidation of community organization

The Aurora program demonstrated at the conference what can be initiated through a community development process. However, the local program did not sustain itself during the year. The youth programs continued aided by agricultural extension staff; the library struggled during the year without adequate volunteers; and the grocery store and youth center never materialized. Longer staff service was probably required to sustain the process than was provided.

It is probably unrealistic to expect trained community development specialists to intensely serve these rural villages. Rather, an alternative emerged out of this project which has possibilities for the future. Indigenous citizens capable of performing a community education function could be employed on a part-time basis. The city clerk in Aurora, for example, was seen to be a "mover" in the community; with some initial training, support, and part-time salary, she could perform a continuous community development worker role. As health care gives greater emphasis to preventive services such as nutritional education; as transportation energy costs accelerate making it more costly for people to travel and for out-of-town experts to frequently serve these villages; as more decentralized and modest technologies become feasible -- a favorable climate emerges for these rural villages to nurture self-sufficiency and to develop their own resources for self-care. Further planning should be provided to determine the feasibility to this approach and to initiate some experimental projects in this direction.

C. Survey Instrument: The development of the survey instrument was enhanced by modifying and employing it in a rural village, Huron. In addition to obtaining basic characteristics of individuals, a series of questions were asked on the following categories: social relations, community linkages, views about present and future, support for community development, and views about units of local government. The survey instrument was seen as a tool for initiating a community development action as well as a tool for the further research.

D. Coordinate Project with Relevant Resources: Initially the project staff contacted administrative personnel from state departments in Topeka, agricultural extension in Manhattan, and regional services in Cloud County. Although this approach was fruitful for interpreting the general aims and planned activities, the work with resource people occurred more productively when it was in relation to specific tasks in which the proejct became involved.

A finding of the project confirmed the community development approach that from the outset citizens should be primarily involved to organize themselves and define their own needs and priorities. Professionals often have the expertise and time resources which citizens do not possess in similar quantity. But citizen involvement must be given central attention so that a democratic model of social change emerges rather than a heteronomous professional solution.

A general conclusion was that many resources did not reach-out and involve the rural villages. This condition is understandable in considerable part as agencies are already involved with people who are more accessible. Before encouraging the already limited resources offered by institutions, a community development process of organizing citizens to determine which resources they want in relation to who and where they are should happen.

This approach would enable the agencies to make more effective use of their resources rather than spending time on reaching-out to people who possibly don't want or can't make use of these resources at a particular stage of their development.

IV. Conclusion

There is a constant dying and creating of futures. Kansas rural villages' futurity depends upon both its citizens and resources. They have an active, complex existence, and they offer unique opportunities for improvements in the environment and the quality of community life. Citizens of these communities do not hold a fatalistic attitude that their villages are dying; rather, numerous persons were found to be engaged in community betterment, plan to remain in their villages, and want assistance. Institutional resources need to recognize the qualities of these villages and include them more in the main stream of their activities. However, the temptation to exert institutional control must be resisted by professionals.

Rural villages should be encouraged to preserve and to develop further qualities of autonomy and self-sufficiency in the use of energy efficient and other resources which they generate themselves. This approach can be similarly applied in the social and economic organization of these communities. If it is true that we are entering an era of permanent emergencies and shortages, at least economically and environmentally, we should probably also be taking steps to direct social services back to the provision of essential living and survival skills on the basis of mutual aid. Economic, physical, and social development should be planned on the basis of regional semi-self-sufficiency to conserve the environment and to enhance the quality of community life. Perhaps rural villages offer a clue to how to deal with the future.

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